

HWD

EMMYS EDITION

This Is the Netflix Exec to Thank for Your *Wild Wild Country* Binge

Lisa Nishimura, the streaming giant's head of documentary and comedy programming, is changing the way filmmakers and viewers approach nonfiction TV.

by JOY PRESS

SPECIAL ISSUE 2018

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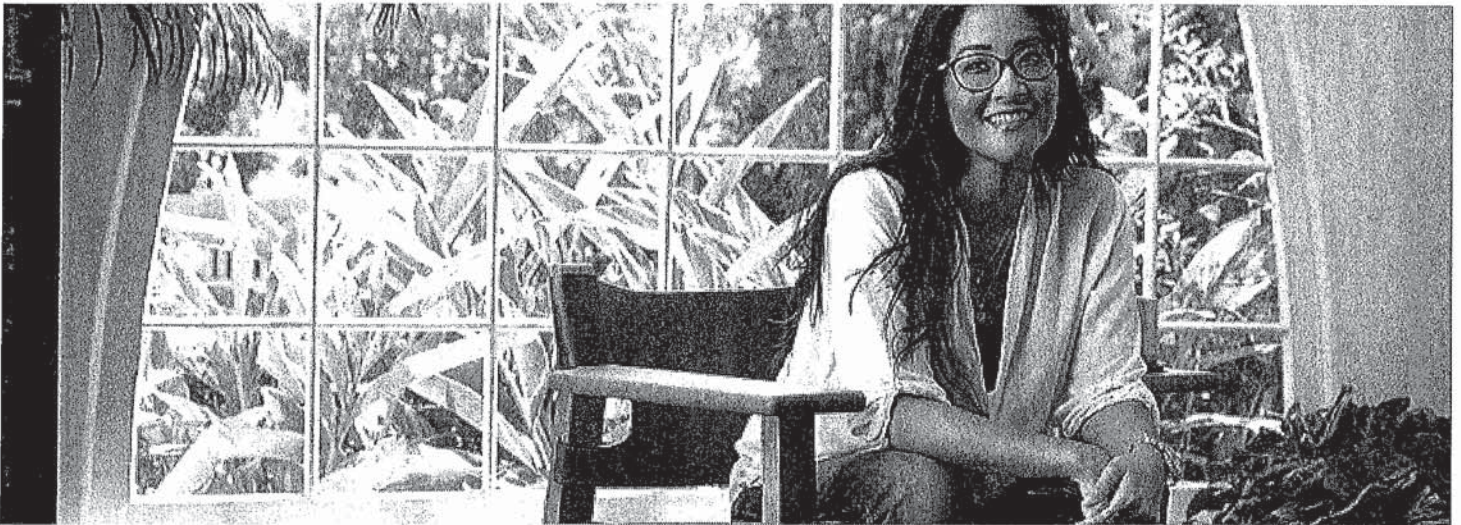
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1 VIDEO

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The brothers' project encompassed free love, utopianism, attempted murders, arson, and bioterrorism. Still, they worried that what they had in mind fell too far outside the realm of the traditional true-crime documentary to be of wide interest.

"We already know what the crimes were; people already pled guilty to these crimes, so there's not a lot of detective investigation work," Maclain says. Instead, the brothers' aim was more adventurous: "It was really about peeling back the cultural and political layers and re-examining what led this group to commit the largest biochemical terrorist attack in the history of the United States."

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Case 1:19-cv-00484-BHL Filed 06/13/19 Page 2 of 16 Document 85-3



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The duo had already spoken to several potential distributors when they sat down with Nishimura and her team. Maclain says most of them were looking for “a very name-recognizable story or biopic, or a subject that they feel has somewhat of a built-in audience.”

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Nishimura was not discouraged by the lack of bold-faced names in the project, or by the fact that the brothers wanted to tell it across six and a half hours. She saw in *Wild Wild Country* a chance to tell a true story in a style as complicated, vivid, and character-driven as a prestige-TV drama. In fact, she already had something like that in the works: *Making a Murderer*, a series investigating circumstances surrounding a Wisconsin man's conviction, which would become a worldwide sensation.

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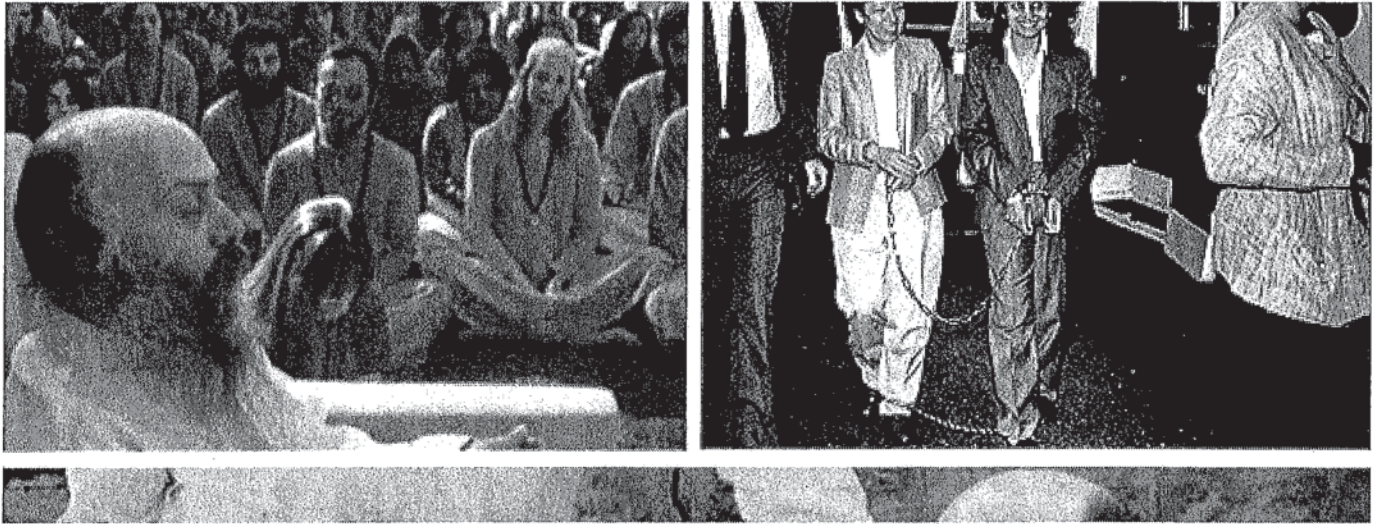
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It *making a murderer* launched Nishimura's reputation as a queen of the docu-series when it premiered in December 2015, *Wild Wild Country* cemented it this spring. After the cult documentary's March release, viewers obsessed over every outrageous detail and delectated in the vintage jewel-colored clothing. Actress Mandy Moore even posted photos from her *Wild Wild Country*-themed party on Instagram. Ma Anand Sheela—secretary to the guru and the charismatic anti-heroine of the series—became a global celebrity in her own right.

Nishimura saw in the brothers a talent for “allowing human beings their full complexity.” she

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Case 1:19-cv-00484-BHL Filed 06/13/19 Page 4 of 16 Document 85-3

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in audiences' growing interest in nonfiction programming, which is key to the company's play for total TV dominance.

Most mornings, Nishimura is up at dawn to screen films before her husband and son wake up in their Spanish-style home on the Westside of Los Angeles. It's during this time of morning calm that she privately watches filmmakers probe the darkest corners of the human experience.

"I never lack awe at people," she says with a laugh, curled up on a window seat. "Why people react



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had run out of funds. They hoped to coax Nishimura into taking a chance on an original long-form series. A 30-minute "get to know you" meeting evolved into a two-hour mind meld.

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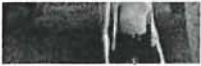
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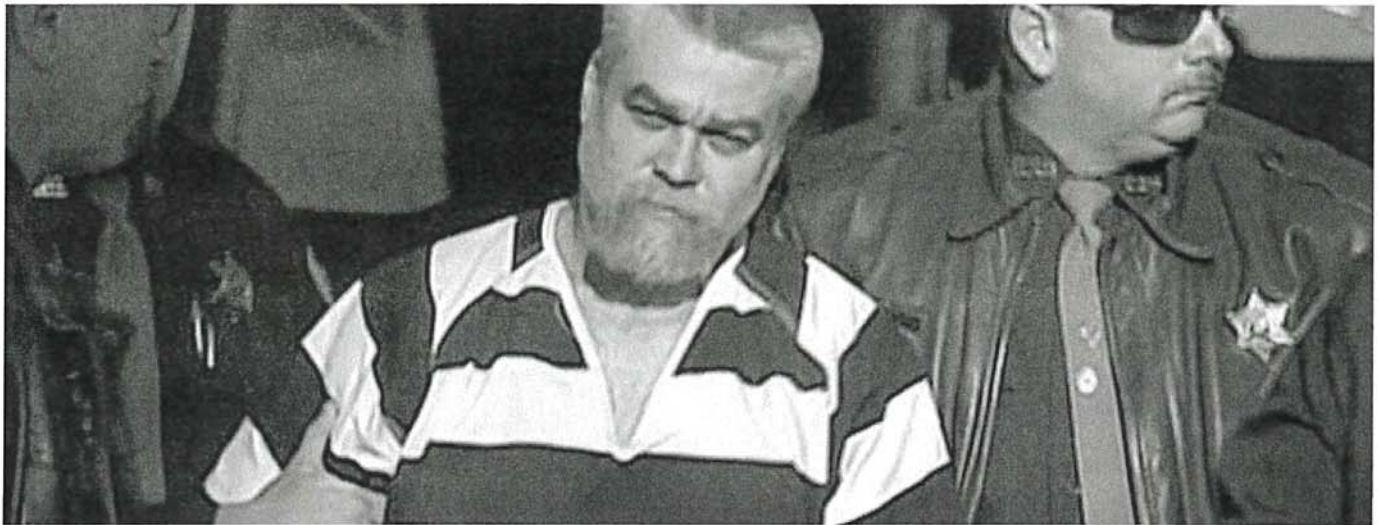
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[Case 1:19-cv-00484-BHL](#) [Filed 06/13/19](#) [Page 6 of 16](#) [Document 85-3](#)



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At the time, Netflix had recently launched a slate of original scripted series—and, along with it, the idea of bingeable TV with *House of Cards* releasing all 13 episodes of its first season at once. Nishimura realized that *Making a Murderer* could do the same for documentary series. Although she occasionally panicked that no one outside of Manitowoc would want to take this harrowing ride through the Wisconsin legal system, Nishimura believed many people would be interested in the plight of Steven Avery. He was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a female photographer while he was suing the county for a previous, wrongful arrest. His 16-year-old nephew, Brendan Dassey, confessed to helping commit the crime after being interrogated without

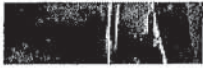
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[Case 1:19-cv-00484-BHL](#) [Filed 06/13/19](#) [Page 7 of 16](#) [Document 85-3](#)

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The 10 hour-long episodes began streaming just before the holidays in 2015. Viewers across the globe devoured the true-crime series and stormed across social media wielding opinions and theories about the case. The documentary's subjects became household names, new legal appeals were filed, and *Making a Murderer* won four Emmys. Nishimura herself became a central node in the documentary eco-system—a veritable doc whisperer. Instead of licensing finished projects to stream on Netflix, she began actively luring some of the best and brightest filmmakers to the service, catalyzing and shaping ambitious new films.

As this newly stoked mass appetite for documentary entertainment (previously considered a



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thing," she says. Her youth was crammed with Suzuki piano lessons and Saturday math classes. Her father, a chemist, encouraged her to watch science-based programming like PBS's *Nova*. And although her mother was an accomplished violinist, a career in the arts or entertainment industry seemed unthinkable. "What I do today was not even something I knew I could want to be," she says.

She'd planned to go to medical school after college, but Nishimura ended up extending an internship at an independent record label into a career in the music industry—much of it working

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would entice audiences to come. While at Palm Pictures, in the early 2000s, Nishimura met Netflix chief content officer Ted Sarandos and vice president of original content Cindy Holland, who were buying DVDs for their upstart movie-rental service. Other buyers talked about films as units; Sarandos and Holland “wanted to talk about the filmmakers, the process, the creation,” Nishimura says. “Like Claude Chabrol—they knew his history and his filmography!”

In 2007, the year Netflix introduced its streaming business—starting with about 1,000 movies and TV series, compared with more than 70,000 by-mail titles—Sarandos offered Nishimura a newly created job overseeing the acquisition of independent-studio content. The plan was to drastically expand the company’s existing digital catalogue. “What was exciting was [that] it was



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or its subscribers have watched a documentary on the service.) And the company's algorithms constantly personalize each subscriber's home page, so that if a user loves foreign films or documentaries those types of films might be framed on his or her Netflix home page on equal footing with a superhero blockbuster. Content isn't ghettoized by genre, in other words, but "presented to you based on tone and timbre," Nishimura says. "When you want to watch something, you think about how you want to feel. You think about what experience you want to have. You don't wake up and say you want to watch something from a particular studio or watch that format."

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Academy Award and could very well be nominated for an Emmy. The same goes for Yance Ford's deeply personal Oscar nominee, *Strong Island*, which is eligible for an Emmy.

“Year over year you’ll see the level of investment and commitment in the documentary space on the global level,” says Nishimura.

“Listen, we absolutely respect the respective [film and TV] academies,” Nishimura says carefully, fingering a delicate gold chain that hangs around her neck. “We understand that we are new and it does present new questions.” But she says that, if the awards bodies’ rules allow Netflix to



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For *The White Helmets*, a short doc about rescue workers in war-torn Syria that won Netflix its first Oscar, it meant getting the film out quickly so the filmmakers could show the world what was happening there. For *13th*, it meant brainstorming with DuVernay about ways to make difficult historical material more relatable via popular music and vivid graphics—and then bankrolling those pricey elements.

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pollinate"; the result was a four-and-a-half-hour boundary-dissolving opus starring Peter Sarsgaard that was shot with 10 cameras by renowned cinematographer Ellen Kuras. Nishimura says she was hooked as soon as Morris mentioned that he didn't think any place else would let him do this crazy thing. "I couldn't fathom not trying!" she says, breaking into a giant smile.

Last month, at the Series Mania Festival, in Lille, France, Netflix C.E.O. Reed Hastings said that the company would be pulling away from the movie business in order to "mostly focus on series and standup, docuseries and great content we can do without disrupting or being perceived to

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experimental dives into specific niches, like food. (Nishimura's team is responsible for a raft of foodie series ranging from raucous gastro-travelogue *Ugly Delicious* to *Rotten*, a grim glimpse inside the food industry.)

Nishimura says Netflix measures a documentary's success in a multitude of ways: awards and critical acclaim figure into the calculus, as does the size of viewership in relation to the cost of the project. Ideally, a film will resonate globally, which is why Nishimura spends a good deal of time traveling. But the best-case scenario is that a project goes viral, à la *Making a Murderer* and *Wild Wild Country*. Whether or not any Netflix documentaries win Emmys this year, Nishimura plans



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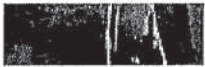
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Joy Press is a T.V. Correspondent for *Vanity Fair*. Her book, *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television*, was released in February.

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